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C O N F I D E N T I A L VATICAN 002890

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/WE LEVIN; DRL/IRF INBODEN; EAP/K

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/21/2014

TAGS: PHUM EAID PGOV KN VT KS KIRF

SUBJECT: NORTH KOREA: CATHOLIC RELIEF AGENCY BUILDING
BRIDGES

REF: VATICAN 05264

Classified By: Ambassador Jim Nicholson, reasons 1.5 (b and d)

Summary

1. (C) The Holy See's North Korea Country Director told us July 9 that Caritas has reinforced its traditional emergency food aid programs with training programs for local North Korean officials. The Vatican is cautiously optimistic that this focus on relationship building will create a greater acceptance of Western aid workers, and a growing openness in North Korean society that could eventually lead to a degree of religious freedom. End Summary.

Food Aid Builds Relationships in the Hermit Kingdom

2. (C) Holy See Country Director for North Korea, Monsignor Luis Montemayor, reviewed with us July 9 the work in North Korea of Catholic relief agency Caritas International-- one of the largest NGOs providing humanitarian aid in the DPRK. He noted that Caritas provided emergency food aid for immediate crises and conducted training programs for North Koreans in local governance and cooperation with Western aid agencies. The latter, he said, are deliberately under-reported by Caritas for fear that media attention could spark a governmental crack-down on Western aid work.

3. (C) The DPRK clients in these "confidence-building programs" are primarily officials from "semi-governmental" North Korean organizations. According to Montemayor, these programs not only facilitate the deployment of Caritas aid, but also foster long-term relationships between Western aid workers and North Korean officials. He understood that local officials had begun to exhibit greater trust of outsiders after increased exposure to Westerners.

4. (C) Kathi Zellweger, Director for International Cooperation for Caritas Hong Kong, told us Caritas has made this focus on personal relationships and openness a central aspect of its strategy to advance its work in North Korea. She noted that Caritas had sponsored "exposure tours" for North Koreans, such as a recent a trip to China for the new Korean Association for Supporting the Disabled. The North Koreans saw first hand the techniques the Chinese use in working with the disabled -- and the cooperation between the Chinese and Caritas. Zellweger said that requests for study tours and training programs abroad are increasing, and Caritas now tries to introduce such exposure programs whenever possible.

Comment

5. (C) The Holy See recognizes that there is currently very little space in the political and social framework of the DPRK for religious freedom, but believes Caritas can help create at least a little room for outside influence in the country. In addition, these programs can supplement Caritas' traditional emergency aid efforts to quietly build long-term relationships between North Koreans and outsiders. Taking this long-term view, the Vatican hopes that the seeds Caritas sows today in North Korea that will eventually produce a more open society with religious freedom for all.

NICHOLSON

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2004VATICA02890 - Classification: CONFIDENTIAL